



**Committee on
Homeland Security** Democrats
Bennie G. Thompson, Ranking Member

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**Statement for Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson, Committee on Homeland Security
Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Prevention of Nuclear and Biological Attack:
Mitigating Catastrophic Events Through Effective Medical Response**

"I'd like to welcome our witnesses here today. I appreciate your service to our nation as volunteers of the National Disaster Medical System. This hearing today is timely, in light of hurricanes Katrina and Rita and a third hurricane - Wilma - that is lurking in the Caribbean.

"As a part of the response to the disaster caused by Katrina and Rita, FEMA has said that it activated and deployed all of the nation's 50 Disaster Medical Assistance Teams to respond to the emergencies. The medical response teams are typically made up of 20 - 35 people and should have the ability to deploy and be self sustaining for 72 hours in the early stages of an emergency, until other help arrives. This kind of medical response capacity was desperately needed in the aftermath of the hurricane which, by some estimates, destroyed or rendered unusable more than 6000 hospital beds. However, after-action reports indicate that the effectiveness of these teams was greatly diminished because of a lack of coordinated leadership from FEMA, who is supposed to have operational authority over these teams when they are deployed.

"We must ensure that this valuable resource is used to its greatest effectiveness in times of emergency. Lives are literally on the line. I have heard reports that the logistical support in some cases was so lacking that a team deployed to the New Orleans airport literally was given only a desk with a few bandages and medical supplies, akin to a nurse's station at an elementary school. Add to this a lack of overall mission, late and confused deployment, and a lack of communication and coordination, and the effectiveness of these teams can be reduced to nearly useless.

"On the other hand, if utilized properly, these teams will be an asset that will be key in protecting the lives and the health of our citizens. I know that some of you are here because you are frustrated because you feel you volunteered with the best intentions, and fell victim to red tape and bureaucracy. Don't worry about angering or offending those in positions over you in the NDMS or in FEMA. We want to know exactly what went wrong and what went right.

"It is important for the members of this committee to hear the truth, for only then can we fulfill our oversight responsibilities and try to correct problems. Once again, I thank you for your service, both in responding to medical disasters, and for appearing here before us today."

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